

Salford Parish Council

Social Media & Digital Communications Policy

October 2022

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to parish councillors, council staff and others who engage with the council using online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet.

Salford Parish Council
Social Media and Digital Communications Policy October 2022

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1. Introduction

Social media is a term for websites based on user participation and user-generated content, including social media sites and other sites that are centred on user interaction.

This policy is intended to help Councillors and Council staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media and digital communications, and to outline Salford Parish Council's position on various aspects of social media and digital communication use, including the management of comments made by members of the public when using SPC's social media sites.

It includes standards and guidelines for Councillors and Council staff to observe when using social media as a channel for communication, the management of public comments, and the action to be taken in respect to breaches of this policy.

This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Salford Parish Council website
- Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro-blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Blogs and discussion forums
- Email

This policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction, with all other policies and procedures adopted by Salford Parish Council. The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication.

Over time Salford Parish Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services the Council delivers. When these changes occur this policy may be updated to reflect the new arrangements if required. This policy may be amended at any time.

2. How Social Media and digital communications will be used by the Council

Social media and digital communications may be used for:

- Engagement with individuals and communities for the promotion of Council based information, services, decisions and actions
- Supporting local democracy
- Distribute in whole or part information from council notices, agendas, approved minutes and dates of meetings
- Information specifically agreed to be communicated via social media at Council meetings

- Advertising events and activities that Saltford Parish Council has organised or co-organised, or supports as being beneficial for the community
- Sharing good news stories relevant to the local area
- Sharing safety information
- Announcing new information relevant to people living in or around the Saltford area
- Providing, signposting and exchanging information about local services and events
- Support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience
- Gathering local resident's insights
- Promoting cultural events or tourism in the area
- Advertising vacancies for Saltford Parish Council, or B&NES Council and its partner vacancies
- Re-tweet or share relevant information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc
- Post, retweet or share relevant information from local community groups for community benefit such as information from community associations, community groups, schools, sports clubs, Scouts/Guides and charities
- Link to appropriate websites and other social media accounts of sites or organisations that meet the council's expectations of conduct
- Post other items as the council see fit
- Refer resident queries via social media to the Clerk for wider dissemination to Councillors if required

Ultimately it is up to the moderators to post content, however social media and digital communications will not be used for:

- Promoting sponsorship of individuals
- Advertising sale of personal items
- Advertising general vacancies
- Helping to find lost property

Saltford Parish Council runs its social media pages so that it can pass information on to residents quickly. Its primary purpose is as an electronic noticeboard. As it cannot be moderated 24/7 due to the limitations of SPC resource, comments will usually be left switched off bar to those tagged in any posts. Social media accounts will not necessarily be checked regularly and if comments are left on posts they will not necessarily be responded to. (The appropriate way to contact SPC with any enquiries is via SPC's website or by email using the contact details made available, not by comments on posts). SPC's social media accounts are primarily a tool to pass information on.

Though SPC is keen to hear residents views, it will not be able to take comments made on its social media accounts as official comments, this includes planning applications and/or other consultations. In order to manage the comments received, residents will be asked – if necessary – to forward their comments to SPC. This can be done by emailing the Parish Clerk, by contacting a Parish Councillor or by attending a monthly meeting (the latter only if relevant to an agenda item).

3. Who is covered by this policy

The principles of this policy apply to elected and co-opted Parish Councillors, council staff and volunteers (collectively referred to as staff in this policy).

All Councillors and staff are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the council, its services, employees, partners and community.

Individual Parish Councillors and council staff are responsible for what they post, both in a council and personal capacity.

In the main, Councillors and council staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

The Council may take disciplinary action in respect serious breaches of this policy by employees. This may include unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive comments by an employee.

Volunteers in breach of the policy will result in the council no longer using their services and, if necessary, appropriate action will be taken.

The behaviour required in the Councillors Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Councillors will bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply.

Councillors must be aware that their profile as a Councillor means the more likely it is they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking.

Councillors and staff must remember that communications on the internet are permanent and public.

When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the council would be content with the statement should it be made public.

A Councillor or council staff member's behaviour on any social media site must be consistent with the behaviour required generally.

4. Code of Practice

When using social media, Councillors and staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

Councillors and staff should not post comments that they would not be prepared to make in writing or face-to-face.

When participating in online communication, Councillors and staff must:

- Be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, informative and balanced
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud' i.e. use sentence case format and not write in capital letters or red to emphasise points
- Seek permission to publish original photos or videos (posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence so Councillors and staff must ensure any information does not infringe copyright).
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- Be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.
- Spell and grammar check everything

Parish councillors and council staff must not:

- Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers (even if available elsewhere in the public domain)
- Use an individual's name or tag an individual in social media communications unless pre-agreed, or post information about an individual unless given written permission to do so (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation)
- Present personal opinions as that of Saltford Parish Council. If a Councillor or member of staff blogs, tweets or communicates online personally, and not in the role as a Councillor or member of council staff, they must not claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council i.e. they should not include web links to official Council websites, Council logos, Council email addresses or any other Council identification as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council.
- Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they must protect the good reputation of the Council
- Make false or misleading statements
- Post personal or political content, content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council or post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- Make derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory or offensive comments about any person including council staff, councillors, the council or about the people, businesses and agencies the council works with and serves, or post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment. Language that may be deemed offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- Engage in personal attacks, online fights, hostile communications or in any way allow their interaction on websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others
- Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- Post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action)
- Post obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence)
- Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence
- Bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity

Councillors views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the council at a council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Predetermination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, Council staff or residents should report them to the Parish Clerk for referral to the moderator(s) and/or the Council as required.

5. Managing Social Media Accounts

The Parish Clerk will be responsible for posting content on council website and social media pages.

The Council will appoint a moderator, usually the Parish Clerk, to moderate Parish Council social media output and be responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy.

The Parish Clerk or any Councillor also acting as moderator will have authority, without notice or comment, to remove any posts from council social media pages. These include but are not exclusive to comments deemed to be of an inflammatory, defamatory, irrelevant, upsetting, misleading or libellous nature. Such posts may also be reported to the hosts (i.e. Facebook) and also to the Parish Clerk for council records.

The Parish Clerk or any Councillor acting as a moderator will also have the authority to hide individual's comments, and block or ban access from an individual or company's account to SPC's social media pages. A decision to hide comments, block or ban an individual can be taken directly by the Parish Clerk or any Councillor acting as a moderator without consultation with others in SPC, though each moderator should inform the others of this action for awareness.

The Parish Clerk and any other moderator can choose whether commenting is closed/off, fully open or open in part on its posts. When participating in online communication, when commenting is open, SPC will generally allow posts on its social media pages from organisations and members of the public that:

- Are responsible and respectful
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents
- Are objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

Posts may be deleted and the holder of an account banned if a comment or post:

- Gives out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers (even if available elsewhere in the public domain) or inappropriately tags an individual
- Mentions an individual's name in social media communications or post information about an individual unless deemed reasonable (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation) or with permission of the person identified
- Makes intentionally false or misleading statements
- Includes potentially inflammatory, defamatory, libellous, irrelevant, upsetting, misleading or offensive remarks
- Makes derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory, irrelevant, upsetting, misleading or offensive comments about any person including council staff, councillors, the council or about the people, businesses and agencies the council works with and serves, or post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment.
- Uses language that may be deemed offensive, in particular relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief, or use of any offensive language.
- Engages in personal attacks, online fights, and/or hostile communications
- Includes the publication of photographs or videos of identifiable minors without parental permission
- Includes any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action)
- Includes obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence)
- Conducts any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence

It is ultimately up to the moderators – either acting individually or in consultation - as to whether a post will be deleted and/or an account blocked. The decision of the moderator is final.

The Parish Clerk will also be responsible for checking the correct security settings are in place on the social media sites used.

Councillors may assist the Parish Clerk to disseminate information however all must ensure they follow this policy.

No social media account details may be changed without the permission of the Parish Clerk or full council.

This policy will be reviewed on an annual basis. Next due September 2023.